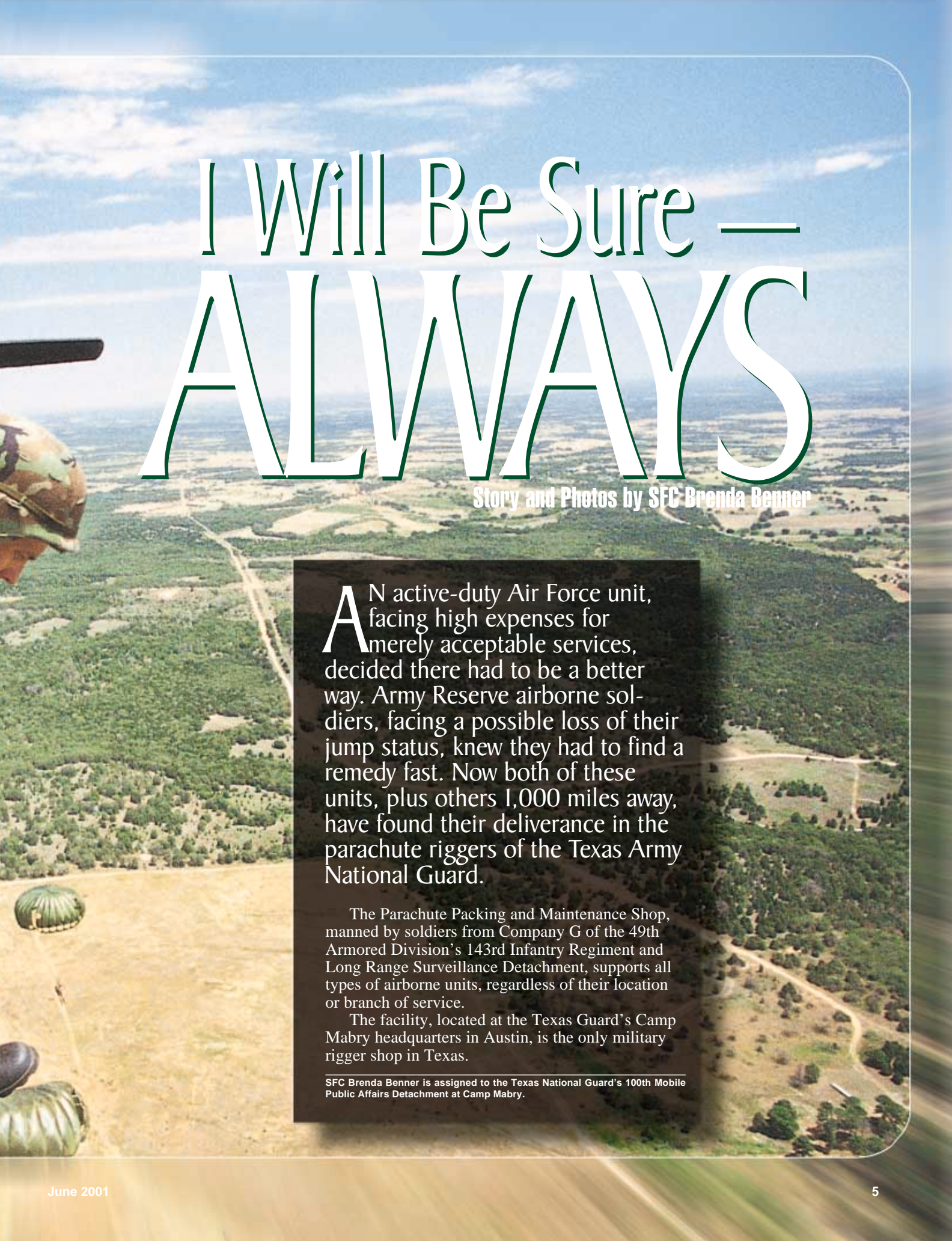


Soldiers
Online



Airborne soldiers take the ultimate leap of faith every time they jump. They entrust their lives to the riggers who repair and pack their parachutes.



I Will Be Sure — ALWAYS

Story and Photos by SFC Brenda Benner

AN active-duty Air Force unit, facing high expenses for merely acceptable services, decided there had to be a better way. Army Reserve airborne soldiers, facing a possible loss of their jump status, knew they had to find a remedy fast. Now both of these units, plus others 1,000 miles away, have found their deliverance in the parachute riggers of the Texas Army National Guard.

The Parachute Packing and Maintenance Shop, manned by soldiers from Company G of the 49th Armored Division's 143rd Infantry Regiment and Long Range Surveillance Detachment, supports all types of airborne units, regardless of their location or branch of service.

The facility, located at the Texas Guard's Camp Mabry headquarters in Austin, is the only military rigger shop in Texas.

SFC Brenda Benner is assigned to the Texas National Guard's 100th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment at Camp Mabry.



Because the PPMS has a maintenance section and personnel qualified in restitching and hole-patching damaged canopies, kit bags and the like, it both repairs and replaces entire parachute kits.

PPMS not only supports active-duty and reserve-component Army units, but also the instructors of the Air Force's Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape unit at Brooks Air Force Base in San Antonio.

Another client is the Marine Corps Reserve's 4th Reconnaissance Battalion, 4th Marine Division, also from San Antonio.

"We have customers from as far away as Nebraska and Illinois," said SGT James C. Whitmore, an Austin-based rigger who drills with Co. G. "We store, inspect and pack nearly 300 main canopies and their accompanying reserves."

SFC Mark S. Dunlap, also of Co. G, is the rigger shop supervisor, and one of the most experienced jumpers in the Texas Army National Guard. He has logged more than 300 military jumps over three decades.

"Our shop is one of four regional parachute support facilities set up by the National Guard Bureau for technical and safety oversight," Dunlap said. The others are in Alabama, West Virginia and Utah.

Units lacking certified riggers of sergeant first class rank or higher, such as Nebraska's long-range surveillance



SGT John M. Naputi teaches the rigger shop's newest member, PFC Daniel A. Yopez, the proper method of pinning canopy fabric.

unit, send their own parachutes and riggers to Dunlap's shop to pack and inspect the chutes under his supervision.

The Air Force's SERE detachment instructors rely on Camp Mabry's rigger shop to pack their chutes and to provide technical support at drop zones.

"They don't have a facility that packs personnel rigs for intentional jumping," said Dunlap. "Air Force riggers only pack the parachutes going into aircraft ejection seats, not the type

a person would use on his back. We are proud to be the SERE's rigging asset."

SERE instructor Tech. Sgt. Timothy Kapp said he thinks highly of the National Guard's rigger service and that civilian services were more expensive than Camp Mabry's rigging shop. And the civilian riggers weren't as experienced with packing the round military parachutes, nor did they have specialized 50-foot-long packing tables.

"The guys at Mabry have all of the experience and all the machines necessary to do the job correctly," said Kapp. "They have a large light table that they use to find tiny holes, tears and most types of contaminants on the fabric."

"We've counted on this National Guard shop for over two years," said Kapp. "We trust what they're doing to our parachutes. Not only have they saved us a lot of money over the course of 200 parachute packings, but we feel more at ease knowing it is they who have us covered. I'm extremely pleased."

The words "I will be sure – always," taken from "The Rigger's Creed," sum up the intense dedication



SGT James C. Whitmore folds the gores of a canopy. Every procedure, from first to last, demands the rigger's full attention.

and high level of skill riggers put into their often tedious and repetitive work.

SGT John M. Naputi, of the LRS Detachment, has packed chutes since 1985 — many of those years on active duty. He knows that jumpers need the assurance that, although they had nothing to do with the chutes before they get them in their hands, everything regarding their parachutes is perfect.

Another excerpt from the rigger's pledge offers a stark reminder to those who wear the red hat.

"I will never let the idea that a piece of work is 'good enough' make me a potential murderer through a careless mistake or oversight, for I know that there can be no compromise with perfection."

It's perfection that comes fold by fold, 30 of them in the 20 minutes it takes to pack one MC1-1 military canopy.

"We trust them every week," said Senior Airman Jeff Martin, an Air Force SERE instructor. "SGT Dunlap and his guys are the greatest."

The Army Reserve's 345th Psychological Operations Co., based in Dallas, is a relatively new PPMS customer. An upcoming Kosovo deployment made keeping a current jump status a high priority for this airborne unit.

SSG Billy Lambert, a psychological operations team chief, said that a major benefit of being a customer is that his unit can "strap hang," or basically tag along with the riggers when they support other airborne missions.

"We must jump at least once every quarter to comply with jump-status qualifications," said Lambert. "The shop's cooperation allows us to stay mission-capable."

If not for the support of Mabry's rigger shop, the 345th would continue sending its parachutes to Fort Bragg, expending much more money and time, Lambert said.

But he added that there's more to this unusual relationship born of necessity than merely saving time and money.

"Considering the enormous amount



SGT Jennifer A. Dunson gathers her chute after a jump. All types of foreign matter — including insects and the occasional snake — can end up in the chutes during recovery.

of experience these riggers have, and the fact they have SGT Dunlap as their jumpmaster, we have the opportunity to learn a lot more about jumping."

The parachute rigger position is the only primary military occupational specialty in the Army that requires a soldier to be airborne-qualified.

"You've got to make it through three weeks of jump school before you can even sign up for three months of rigger training," said Whitmore. "We have to jump anything that we pack. Trainees spend one month in each of the three phases — packing, aerial

delivery of cargo and maintenance of complete parachute kits."

PFC Daniel A. Yepez, the newest member of the PPMS, awaits his chance for a seat at jump school, and subsequently for rigger school.

Yepez, who considers himself a detail-oriented "neat freak," said he's enjoyed the time he's spent watching the riggers prepare the chutes on the packing tables.

"I can't wait for my turn," he said. "I'll have more opportunities to jump as a rigger than just being an airborne-qualified soldier." □